



Lawrence Alma-Tadema
Fête intime (An Intimate Celebration)

LAWRENCE ALMA-TADEMA

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(An Intimate Celebration)

AGNEWS
EST. 1817



Agnews is proud to present this beautiful and important painting by Lawrence Alma-Tadema which was last seen on the open market in 1989 when sold at Christie's London. Remarkably, when offered at auction previously in 1907 it sold for \$18,000, an extraordinary price at that time.

The painting was commissioned by the dealer Ernest Gambart, a hugely influential dealer who dominated the London art world in the middle of the nineteenth century. Gambart and Alma-Tadema were both originally from the Netherlands. Their meeting there in 1864 (Alma-Tadema is said to have covertly devised a plan to lure the dealer to his studio) has been described as 'one of the most crucial events in the development of late nineteenth-century English painting'. It certainly transformed Alma-Tadema's fortunes as Gambart immediately commissioned him to paint twenty-four paintings, and three years later he commissioned forty-eight more, his work regularly hanging in Gambart's so-called French Gallery in London. In some ways, it has been written, Alma-Tadema was Gambart's greatest creation.

Alma-Tadema finally moved to London in 1870, and our painting was completed on 29th July 1871, the day of his marriage to his second wife Laura Theresa Epps. Her face can be seen in our painting as the lead worshiper looking straight at us and holding a *thyrsus*, a staff associated with Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, fertility, and celebration, or his Roman equivalent, Bacchus.

In Britain, Alma-Tadema would have a highly successful forty-two-year career, becoming one of the most popular and wealthy artists of the Victorian era. From the mid-1870s onwards his depictions of intimate figural scenes in opulent classical settings were immensely popular on both the British and American art market. The excavations at Pompeii as well as the publication of novels such as *Ben-Hur* (1880) and *Quo Vadis* (1896) only fuelled this enthusiasm and interest in antiquity and meant that Alma-Tadema's paintings provided the perfect visualisation of this period. Hollywood became equally entranced with his work and when *Ben-Hur* and *Quo Vadis* were made into blockbuster films (1959 and 1951 respectively) Alma-Tadema's work, with its vivacity and sheer technical skill, was heavily referenced.

This continues to this day where the paintings and drawings of Alma-Tadema inspired the design for Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) to such an extent that Scott and his production manager, Arthur Max, dubbed the film's design ethos 'Black Tadema', a sort of dark twist on Alma-Tadema's interpretation of antiquity.

We are extremely grateful to Professor Elizabeth Prettejohn for her essay on the painting.

We hope you enjoy this publication and can visit our gallery to see this and other works of art.

Anthony Crichton-Stuart
DIRECTOR, AGNEWS

SIR LAWRENCE ALMA-TADEMA

(Dronrijp, Netherlands 1836-1912 Wiesbaden)

Fête intime (An Intimate Celebration)

Also known as *A Bacchic dance*, *Bacchanalia*

Opus XCI

Signed and dated (centre right): 'L. Alma-Tadema 1871'

Oil on cradled panel

16 ½ × 32 ½ in. (42.1 × 82.5 cm)

Provenance

Commissioned by Messrs Ernest Gambart, London, 1871, and sold in 1871 to the following;

José de Murrieta (Marquis de Santurce), Catalan, Spain;

Christie's, 24 April 1891 lot 90 for 2,250 gns;

Messrs Arthur Tooth & Sons, London, sold in 1891;

A. Howard Hinkle, Cincinnati, Ohio;

Edward Brandus, New York;

American Art Association, New York, 7 April 1907 lot 136 for \$18,000;

Mr Ingalls;

Parke-Bernet, New York, 12 March 1949 lot 368;

William Doyle Galleries, New York, 13 November 1986 lot 52;

Christie's, 24 November 1989 lot 79 sold for £330,00 to the previous owner.

Exhibited

Paris Salon, 1872, no. 10.

Paris Exposition Universelle, October 1878, no. 6.

London, The Grosvenor Gallery, Winter Exhibition 1882, no. 35.

London, Arthur Tooth & Sons, Winter Exhibition, 1891, no. 103.



Literature

J. Dafforne, 'The works of Laurence Alma-Tadema', *Art Journal* XXVI, 1875, p.9, reproduced (engraved by J.D. Cooper).

Anon, *British Painters of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, London, c.1880-5, facing p.136, reproduced.

C. Vosmaer, *Onze Hedendaagsche Schilders I*, The Hague 1881-5, p.6.

C. Vosmaer, *Alma Tadema Catalogue Raisonné*, unpublished manuscript, Leiden c.1885 (with some later additions), no.108.

American Art Annual, 1891, reproduced.

Graphic, 10 June 1905, reproduced.

R. Dircks, 'The later works of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema O.M., R.A., R.W.S.', *Art Journal* Supplementary monograph, Christmas issue, London, 1910, p.27.

V.G. Swanson, *The biography and catalogue raisonné of the paintings of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema*, London, 1990, pp. 163, 336, no.135, illustrated.

R.J. Barrow, *Lawrence Alma-Tadema*, London, 2001, pp.58-60, pl. 50 (as 'A private celebration').

We are extremely grateful to Professor Elizabeth Prettejohn for the below catalogue entry.



A



he reappearance of this important painting, unseen in public since its sale at Christie's in 1989, marks a significant milestone in the study not merely of Lawrence Alma-Tadema's work, but also of nineteenth-century classical-subject painting in general. The painting was made at a crucial juncture both in Alma-Tadema's career and in his personal life. It was among the first works in which the artist explored subject-matter from the ancient Bacchanalia (religious festivals associated with the wine-god Bacchus), and it made a significant advance in the artist's study of ancient Graeco-Roman religion, a fascination which would grow and develop for the rest of his career. It is also a painting of superb quality, made when the artist had reached the height of his technical powers but still retaining the freshness and lively inspiration of his youthful work.

The refinement of the painting clearly reflects Alma-Tadema's Dutch heritage and his training in Antwerp. Like the *fijnschilder* painting of the Dutch seventeenth century, it is exquisitely detailed and painted with sparkling precision on panel. The scene is set in a private enclosure or courtyard, within which seven revellers abandon themselves to the rhythms of a Bacchanalian dance. The three male figures sport wreaths of vine-leaves, while the female figures to the left have their hair neatly tied with bands or ribbons. All of the figures are fully or even voluminously dressed in white or pale-coloured draperies; this is a joyous but not an indecorous festivity. To be sure, a bearded male figure, perhaps the senior reveller, has succumbed to inebriation and slumps on a plaited cushion at the back of the scene, leaning on the base of the white marble altar and clutching a wine-jug in one hand, a shallow cup in the other. The other figures pay him no attention, and we viewers are only permitted to catch a glimpse of his slumbrous form through the gleaming legs and spokes of the foreground tripod, and behind the graceful leg and foot of the male dancer in the middle ground [*Detail A*]. It is of course a tour de force of the painter's art to present such a complicated arrangement of overlapping objects so clearly that they are immediately intelligible to the spectator. However, it is also a feature of Alma-Tadema's storytelling skill, well-developed by this point in his career, as he entices the viewer to peer through, beyond, and around objects, and into obscure nooks and crannies.

Characteristic, too, is the placement of the tripod – a standard accessory of Graeco-Roman worship – in the foreground, where it upstages all of the human figures. On this sunlit day the smoke emanating from its bowl is visible only as a slight blurring of the air above it, and perhaps introduces an almost subliminal suggestion of the scent of incense. The tripod rests on a spotted panther or fawn skin, closely associated with Bacchanalian worship and again a demonstration of the painter's skill in the rendering of textures, its furriness and wrinkled edges in contrast with the delicate and precise tooling of the bronze tripod.

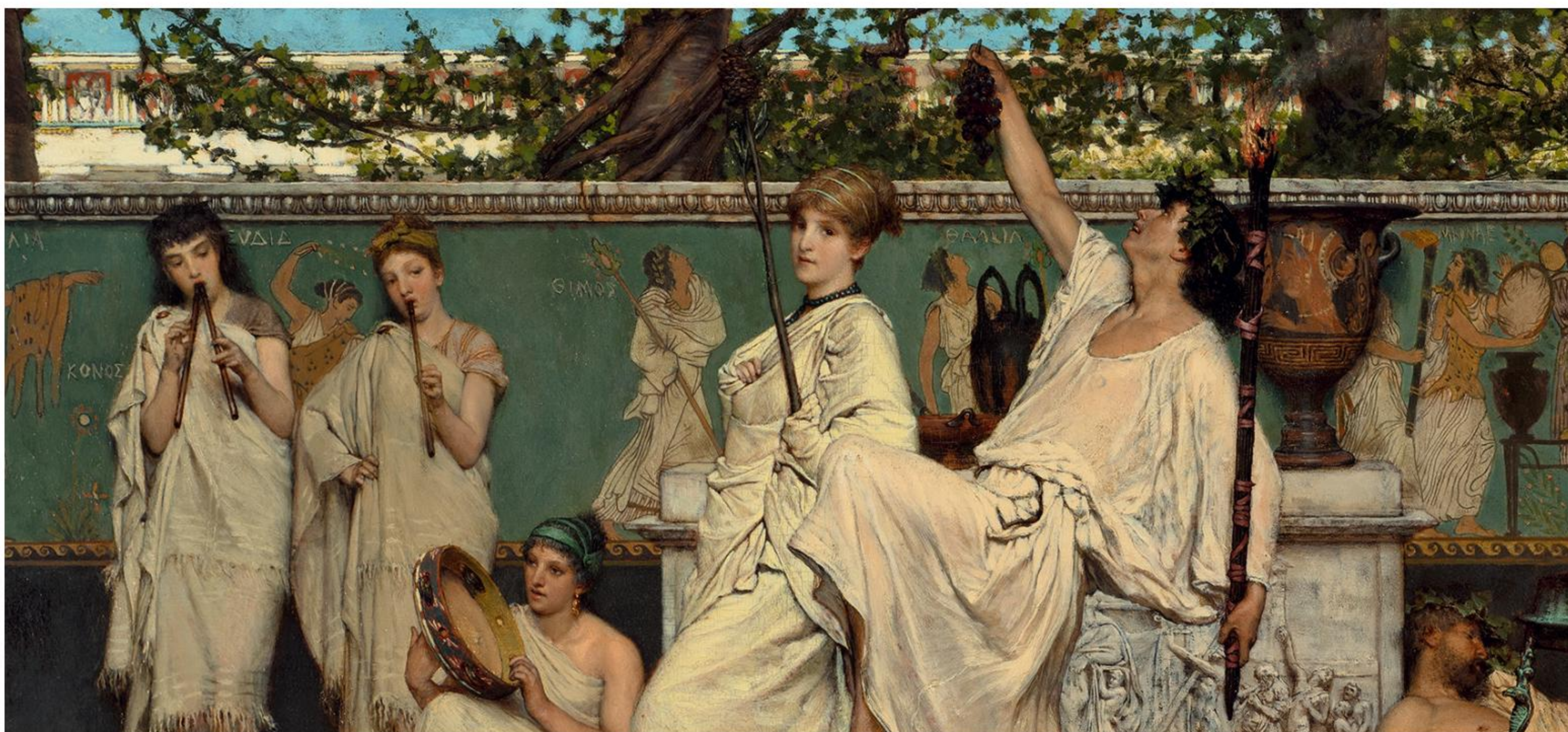
Behind this carefully staged still life of ritual paraphernalia, the principal figures dance in the middleground, moving to the left. At the head of the procession is a female figure, heavily draped and carrying the most important symbol of Bacchanalian worship: the *thyrsus*, a long rod or wand adorned at the top with a pine cone. Next to her, and in the centre of the painting, is a more vigorous male dancer, seemingly about to leap from the ground and kicking up the dust; here the artist varies the smooth sheen of his *fijnschilder* brushwork to indicate the roughness of the ground underfoot [*Detail B*]. The male figure holds aloft, in one hand, a bunch of juicy purple grapes, and in his other hand a burning torch; the complex pose catches the figure in action, balanced on the toes of one foot, head thrown back, and body twisting. At the rear of the brief procession another male figure clashes a pair of gleaming cymbals as he dances. Toward the left is a quieter group of female musicians; the standing figures play wind instruments, the double flute or *tibia* and a single pipe, while the seated figure beats a *tympanum* (a tambourine or hand-drum).

The figures are loosely grouped around a white marble altar, adorned with relief sculpture, on which are placed three red-figure vases of different types [*Detail D*]. Again the painter offers a virtuoso display of compositional ingenuity, as we viewers peer around and between the living figures to make out the sculptured forms of another, and more populous, Bacchanalian procession carved in the white marble of the altar. And that is not all: behind the altar the long flat wall provides a backdrop, adorned with a wall-painting featuring yet another Bacchanalian procession. Here, to the right of the marble altar and aligned so as to appear immediately above the foreground tripod, is a painted representation of the god himself, placed behind a depicted table-altar and surrounded by musicians and revellers.

In the painting as a whole, then, Alma-Tadema presents us with not just one, but three successive Bacchanalian processions, each one behind the next and each in a different medium: the ‘living’ figures of the main scene, then the white marble figures of the relief sculpture on the altar, and finally the painted figures on the back wall. Nor does that exhaust the pictorial layers of this complex space: above the delicately delineated egg-and-dart moulding that forms the top of the rear wall there is glimpsed a thicket of trees. Once again the viewer is asked to look through and between depicted elements, in this case the tangle of naturalistic branches and leaves – plus the pine cone, grapes, and burning torch held up by the revellers – to be rewarded, finally, by glimpsing the long frieze of what must be a very large Doric building behind the wall. The triglyphs and metopes of this frieze extend in regular procession across the entire horizontal extent of the painting, and they are brilliantly painted in red and gold, with a clear blue Mediterranean sky above [*Detail C*].



B



C



D

It was not until the year after this painting was completed that the artist began to inscribe his famous 'opus numbers' on his works. Therefore, his characteristic signature ('L. Alma-Tadema') appears with the date '1871' (rather than an opus number, as in later works) on the far right, just below the bottom edge, with its wave decoration, of the fictive wall-painting. In 1872, when Alma-Tadema devised the system of opus numbers, he retrospectively assigned numbers to the more important pictures of previous years. This work was given the number (piquantly expressed in Roman numerals) XCI, which appears in catalogues of his works although not on the surface of the painting; that means that it is the ninety-first among the paintings the artist had made, since the beginning of his career, which he considered sufficiently high in quality to include in the list of his autograph works (his entire oeuvre came to 408 opused works by the time of his death in 1912).¹ The opus numbers served the important function of preventing forgery (or at least making it much more difficult): each authentic painting by Alma-Tadema has a unique number which can be matched to his list of works. The use of the Latin word 'opus' (or 'work') is not only appropriate to the classical subject-matter but also recalls the opus numbers routinely given by composers to their musical works.

By 1871, when Alma-Tadema signed and dated the painting, he was working his way through the second of the sets of paintings commissioned from him by the international art dealer Ernest Gambart (the first commission for 24 pictures was given in 1864, a rare opportunity for an artist at the very beginning of his career; the second commission for 48 paintings followed in 1867).² After early experiments with medieval and Egyptian subject-matter, since the middle 1860s he had been concentrating his efforts on establishing an authoritative command of the material environment, together with the manners and customs, of Graeco-Roman antiquity. At first slow to catch on with audiences and buyers, Alma-Tadema's distinctive approach to classical-subject painting was now on the cusp of genuine success, both critical and commercial. The role of *Fête intime* in the artist's career at this critical moment has not been fully appreciated, due to its absence from the major exhibitions of the artist's work.³ Now that it has again been brought to light, it can regain its rightful place in the story of the artist's development.

But what, precisely, was that place? As we have already seen, *Fête intime* was the ninety-first painting that the artist deemed worthy of admission to his definitive oeuvre. It was not, however, merely another panel painting in the sequence of subjects from Graeco-Roman antiquity that he was building up at this date. Not only was it a particularly fine example of his technique and compositional skill; it also made a novel experiment in combining personal with public significance that would have multifarious ramifications later in his career.

*An Intimate
Celebration?*

Alma-Tadema's worklist dates the completion of the painting to 29 July 1871: the day of the artist's second wedding (after his first marriage ended in the tragic death of his wife, Pauline, in Brussels two years earlier).⁴ In a later letter to the Dutch author Carel Vosmaer, his first biographer and compiler of his catalogue of works, Alma-Tadema explained that he worked furiously on this and another painting from 4 AM to 9.30.⁵ At 10 AM, the same morning, he married the nineteen-year-old Laura Theresa Epps at Marylebone Register Office in London, in the presence of her parents, the prominent homeopathic physician Dr George Napoleon Epps and his wife Anne Charlotte. Perhaps the artist rushed to finish the two paintings in order to secure funds for his honeymoon and the furnishing of the couple's first home, the beautifully decorated Townshend House on the north side of Regent's Park. The story, however, also reveals the astonishing energy and industriousness that characterised his approach to his work throughout his career. His new wife would have understood either of these motivations. She was a talented artist in her own right, who after a period of critical neglect common to many women artists of her generation is now enjoying a notable vogue, with rapidly rising prices for her work.⁶ She was also the co-creator, with her husband, of the imaginative interiors at Townshend House, and later in the even more splendid studio-house at 17 Grove End Road in St John's Wood.⁷

The painting has been known under several titles, among which the earliest – and the one certainly sanctioned by the artist – is the French title given to it for its first public exhibition, at the Paris Salon in 1872: *Fête intime*, which can be translated as 'intimate celebration' or 'private party'. Perhaps this is meant to allude, subtly or even covertly, to the personal significance of the work as a celebration of the marriage of Laura and Lawrence. Among the precisely characterised ancient pots on the altar is a red-figure vase with long handles; this is a *lebes gamikos*, a vase associated in antiquity with weddings [*Detail D*]. A similar vase appears in other works by Alma-Tadema, but in this instance it can surely be read as a clue to the private significance of this particular 'intimate celebration'. The romantic story about the wedding morning may not be literally true – certainly a painting so carefully crafted would require weeks of hard work, not a single morning. But there is no doubt about the foundation for the story: Alma-Tadema was head over heels in love when he devised and painted this composition.

Laura herself must have served as the model for the principal Bacchanalian worshipper, the one carrying the *thyrsus*. Indeed there is no attempt to disguise the potential incongruity of the figure's English colouring, her golden hair and ivory-pink complexion, in this Graeco-Roman context. The figure's long face and nose, with full cheeks and melting dark eyes, correspond closely to portraits of Laura at

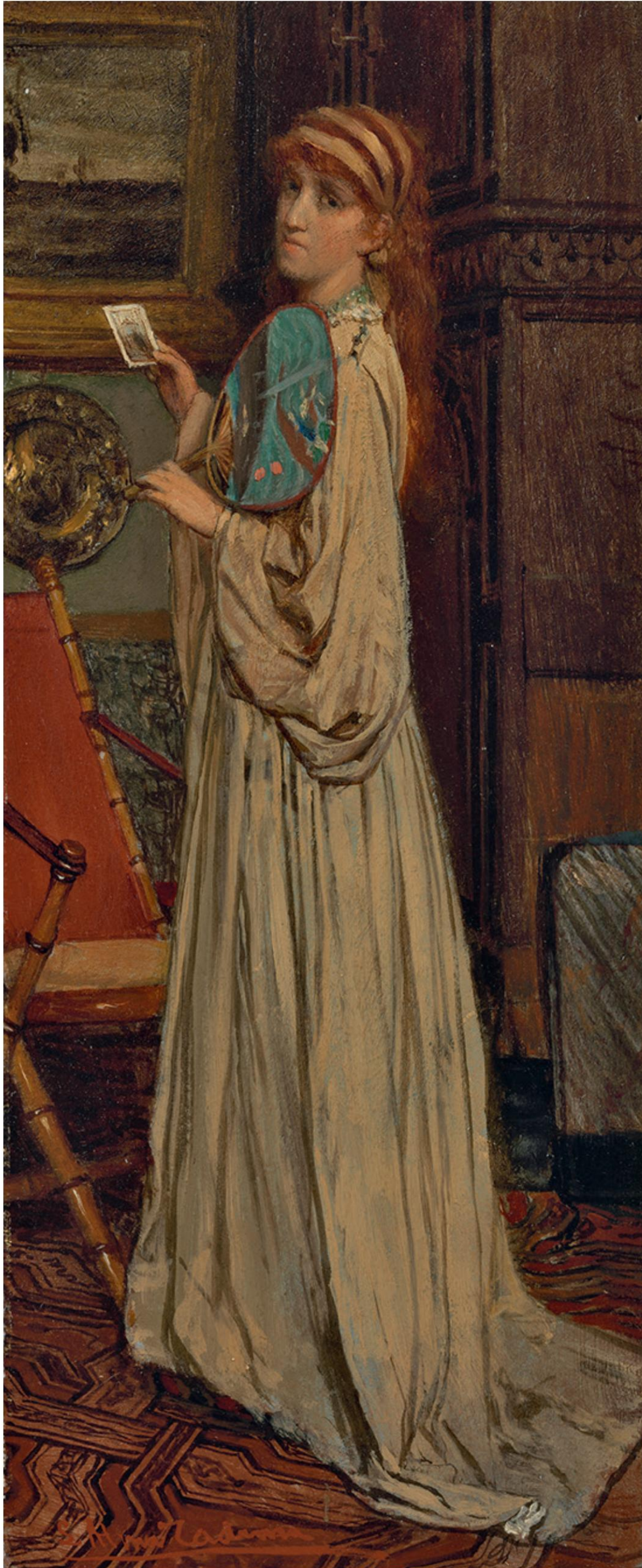


Fig. 1
Lawrence Alma-Tadema,
Portrait of the Artist's Wife,
1871, Opus XCIII, oil on panel,
26.2 × 10.5 cm, The Mesdag
Collection, The Hague

about this date by her husband (figs 1, 2) and by Laura's sister Ellen Epps, later the wife of the author Edmund Gosse (fig. 3).⁸ Her own still-life painting of 1872, *The Mirror*, features a tiny self-portrait piquantly reflected at the lower edge of the convex mirror (fig. 4); again the facial features are immediately recognisable, as is the characteristic hairstyle, piled high on the head. In these examples Laura wears modern clothes, including the loose, unstructured gowns fashionable in the London social circles associated with the Aesthetic Movement, and accessories such as Japanese fans and abundant strings of heavy, colourful beads. The strings of beads reappear in *Fête intime*, seemingly transported from 'aesthetic' London back into the world of classical antiquity. On the other hand, the Bacchanalian figure's hairstyle, with three bands encircling the head, is an ancient fashion – an exact imitation of the hairstyle of a figure seen to the left on the background wall-painting – yet a similar hairstyle is found in Alma-Tadema's portraits of Laura in modern dress. It is as though the real modern woman and her fictional ancient counterpart are able to share their fashions and accessories across two millennia.

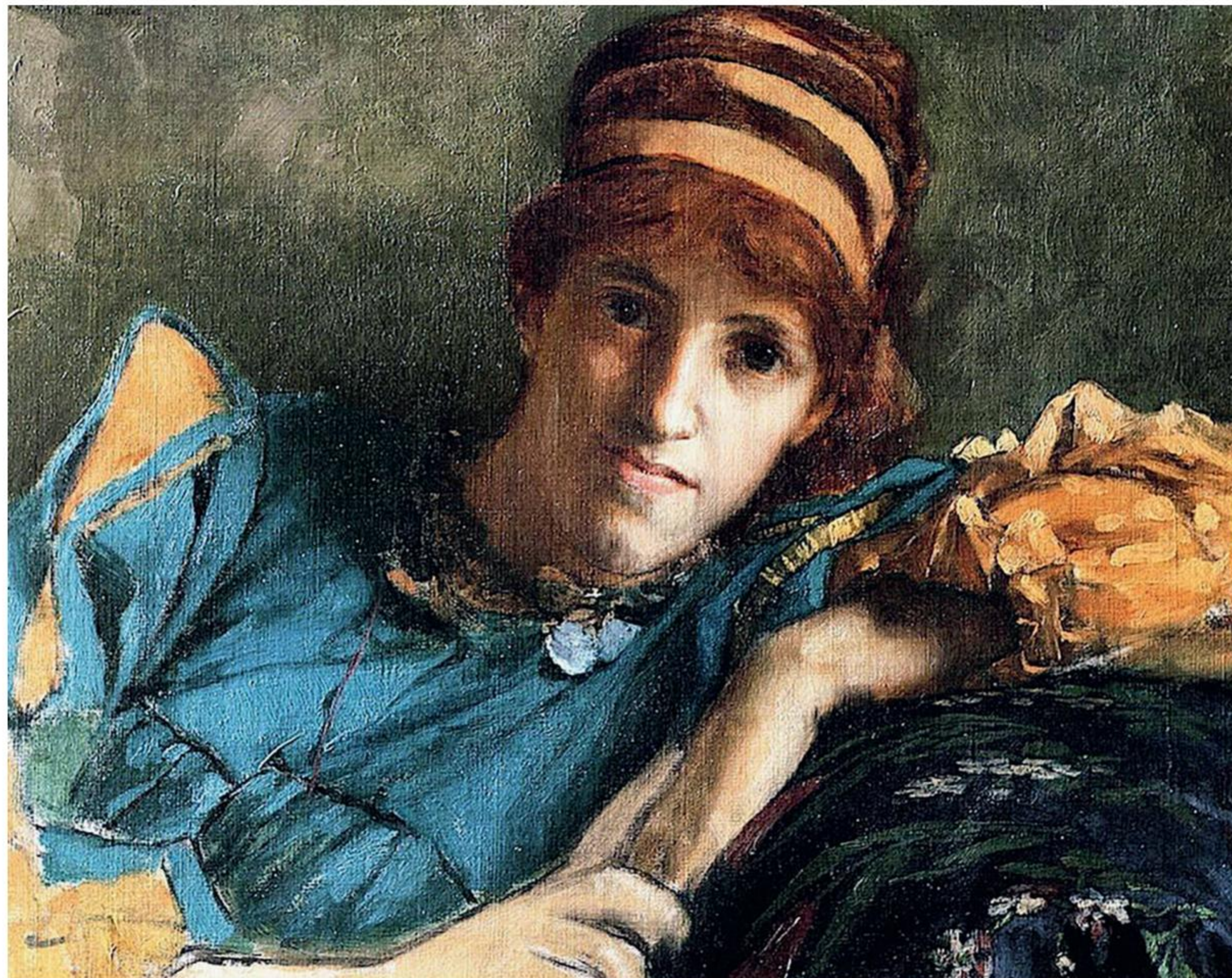


Fig. 2
Lawrence Alma-Tadema,
*Portrait of Miss Laura
Theresa Epps*, 1871, Opus
XC, oil on canvas, 41 × 51 cm,
private collection, England

This figure is the only one to make eye contact with the viewer. Whereas the other worshippers seem absorbed in their revels, the female figure breaks the barrier between past and present. She seems to act as an intermediary between the precisely characterised scene of ancient religious worship and the modern world of the viewer.

So far we have considered the painting as though it were exclusively a private picture with personal significance, and that works well enough: the portrait of Laura, details such as the inclusion of the *lebes gamikos*, and the general air of celebration all fit such an interpretation, as does the painting's original title, *Fête intime*. But the painting was not – or not only – a private celebration. It was designed for public exhibition, and it was given its French title for inclusion in the Salon catalogue of 1872; a decade later the artist displayed it in his large retrospective exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery in London. Moreover, it was made as part of Alma-Tadema's commitment to his dealer, Gambart, to provide him with 48 marketable paintings, and duly sold to an important client, José Murrieta del Campo Mello y Urrutia, a London banker of Spanish descent and fabulous wealth, created Marqués de Santurce in 1877. Murrieta was a distinguished collector of wide-ranging tastes (including English watercolours by such artists as J.M.W. Turner and David Cox and French landscapes of the Barbizon school), and he certainly favoured Alma-Tadema's works, of which he eventually owned 20, the largest group by a single artist in his collection.⁹ He was not, however, a personal friend of the artist. Whatever its private significance, then, *Fête intime* had to interest and delight individuals and wider audiences who would be entirely unaware of its relevance to Alma-Tadema's private life.

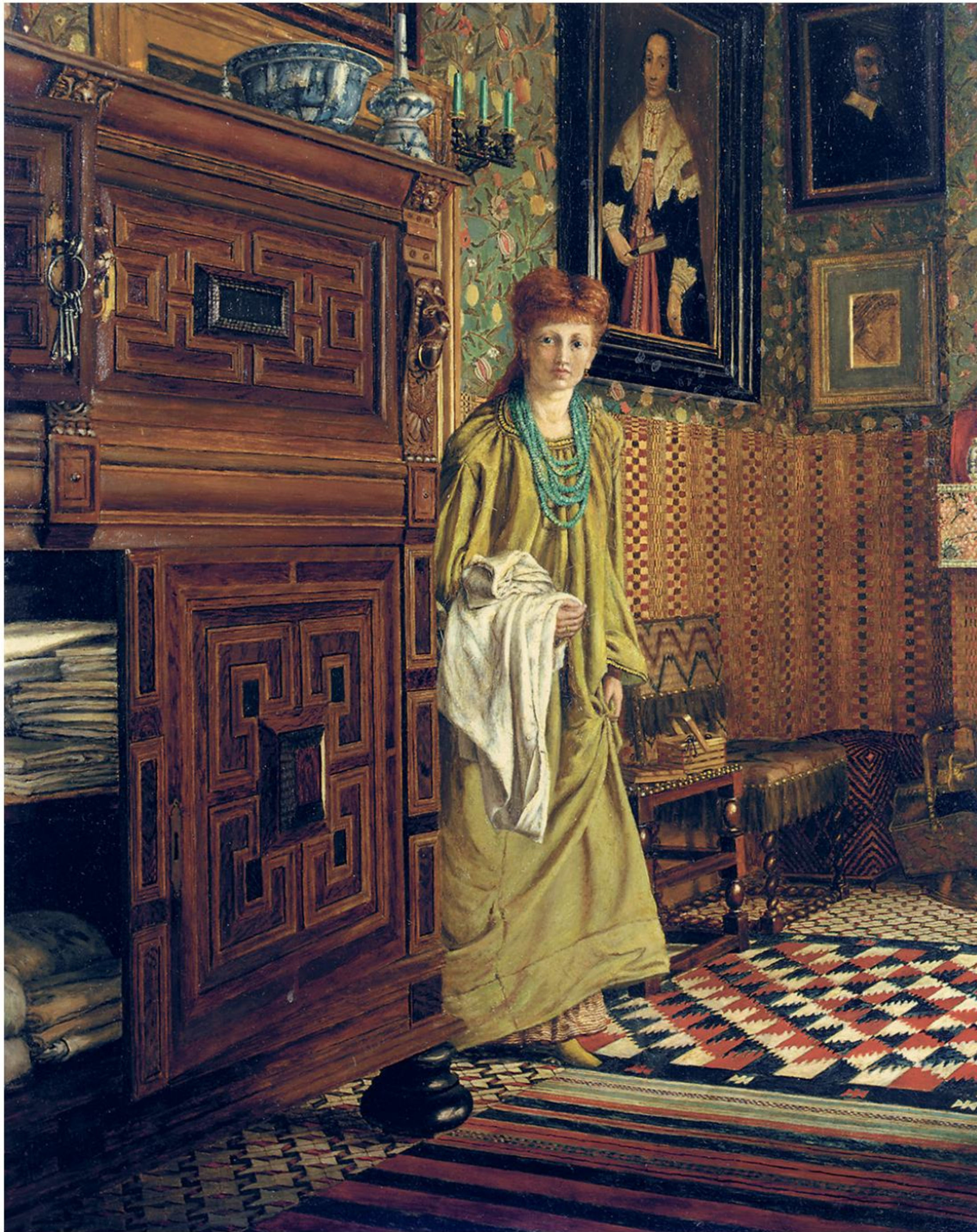


Fig. 3
Ellen Epps (later Gosse), *Laura Alma-Tadema Entering the Dutch Room at Townshend House*, 1873, oil on canvas, 76.3 x 63.5 cm, private collection



Fig. 4
Laura Theresa Alma-Tadema, *The Mirror*, 1872, oil on canvas, 61.8 x 31.4 cm, The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

It was on his first honeymoon, in 1863, that Alma-Tadema had made his initial visit to Pompeii, where he was captivated by the sense of coming into direct contact with the physical spaces and material environment of classical antiquity. In the next few years, he embarked on a new and distinctive artistic project which brought together the meticulous detail and careful execution of the Dutch and Flemish tradition, in which he had been trained, with detailed research into the manners and customs of the ancient Romans. His paintings of the 1860s reimagine the everyday social lives of anonymous characters – shopping, going to the theatre, conversing about poetry or admiring one another’s art collections – in settings based on the artefacts and small-scale domestic environments of Pompeii, which was then experiencing an exciting new phase of intensive excavation. Perhaps the concentration on Pompeii was driven, in part, by sheer practicality. Alma-Tadema’s approach, based on the exact recreation of the ancient material environment down to its last detail, required elaborate research, and the best evidence was to be found at Pompeii, or in the artefacts removed from Pompeii to the Museo Archeologico Nazionale (National Archaeological Museum) in Naples. For Alma-Tadema it was not enough merely to introduce a piquant artefact or two. He wanted his scenes to display a vivid realism equivalent to those of the seventeenth-century Dutch genre painters. Unlike those artists, however, Alma-Tadema could not observe the ancient material environment first-hand, as a complete whole; every figure, object, or detail had to be researched and placed into coherent relation to form an entire scene. As his friend and early biographer, the German Egyptologist Georg Ebers, explained:

The sailor’s boat, the fisherman’s net, the labor of the vine-dresser and husbandman – everything appertaining to the daily life of the ancients – from the noblest work of art to the most insignificant clay jug the potter turned on his wheel – possessed interest for him. His scientific perception carried him into the very heart of family life. Every garment, every ornament which had been worn by men and women, nay, even the way that the children had been clothed and educated became familiar to him. He soon understood the arrangement of the houses so thoroughly that he could assign each utensil its proper place...¹⁰

Towards the end of the 1860s the artist began to take special interest in the religious customs of antiquity, using the same meticulous approach: ‘he now investigated the temple ruins in Italy and made himself acquainted with the costumes and privileges of the priests, the routine of the worship, the sacrifices, and festal processions’.¹¹

As Ebers's wording suggests, Alma-Tadema's fascination with ancient religion was not limited to any particular cult, but a special focus was the Bacchanalia, or festivities associated with the wine-god Bacchus in the Roman world, closely related to the Greek cult of Dionysus. His first major foray into this range of imagery was *The Vintage Festival* of 1870 (fig. 5), a painting four times the size of *Fête intime*, and appropriately so: it shows a large public celebration with an extensive procession of celebrants and musicians in the foreground, and a huge crowd, perhaps amounting to hundreds of more riotous revellers, in the vast atrium behind them. Although a pavement inscription in the left foreground names a prominent Pompeian citizen (Marcus Holconius Rufus), and many of the details are derived from Pompeian examples, the building is far grander than any to be found at Pompeii. In this canvas, Alma-Tadema imagines a public festivity on the grand scale of an urban setting, perhaps Rome itself.

Fête intime, though smaller, is not less important to Alma-Tadema's overall project. It shows a different side of Bacchanalian worship, the private or domestic celebration as opposed to the big public festivity. Both aspects are necessary to Alma-Tadema's exploration of the Bacchanalia, and they also remind us of the artist's wider interests. He was fascinated not only by the unbuttoned revelry associated with the wine-god, but also by all kinds of religious observance, at all scales and involving all classes and types of people. A painting of 1869, entitled *A Pyrrhic Dance* (fig. 6), represents the ritual performed by ancient Greek soldiers, associated with the great Athenian festival, the Panathenaea; despite the different context, this painting has much in common with *Fête intime*, including the massive Doric architectural setting and the dust kicked up by the dancers' feet. While Bacchanalia make up the majority of Alma-Tadema's larger scenes of ancient religious custom, he also represented humbler forms of worship, such as shrines at street-corners or in domestic settings, in both oil and watercolour. Alma-Tadema's interest in ancient religion was not trivial or dilettantish. Not only did it warrant a vast quantity of research; it also involved a serious effort of the imagination to make it visually persuasive. This total immersion in the practices he wished to represent distinguishes Alma-Tadema from other classical-subject painters of his day, such as the Néo-Grecs in France.¹² An exception might be Frederic Leighton's monumental painting of 1876, *The Daphnephoria* (fig. 7), representing a religious ritual devoted to the god Apollo. This painting, however, is of all Leighton's works the one that perhaps demonstrates the influence of Alma-Tadema. Many other paintings of ancient religion in the later nineteenth century, made by artists in France and Italy as well as England, appear more obviously derivative from Alma-Tadema, who was surely the originator of this vein of interest in classical antiquity.



Fig. 5
Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Vintage Festival*, 1870, Opus LXXXI,
oil on canvas, 77 × 177 cm, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg



Fig. 6
Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *A Pyrrhic Dance*, 1869, Opus LXIX, oil on panel,
40.6 × 81.3 cm, Guildhall Art Gallery, Corporation of London



Fig. 7
Frederic Leighton, *The Daphnephoria*, 1876, oil on canvas,
231 × 525 cm, Lady Lever Gallery, Port Sunlight

Both *The Vintage Festival* and *Fête intime* include the characteristic accoutrements of Bacchanalian worship: the *thyrsus*, blazing torch, musical instruments, and abundant vessels for carrying, storing, or serving wine. Both also include a white marble altar with relief sculptures and a prominent bronze tripod, larger and more elaborate in *The Vintage Festival*, slenderer and more finely crafted in *Fête intime*. While both paintings are executed with Alma-Tadema's characteristic meticulousness, *The Vintage Festival* is on canvas, a more reliable support for a painting of this larger size; however, the panel support for *Fête intime*, with its smoother surface, gives more delicacy and sheen to the colours. Alma-Tadema's serious interest in music is evident in the subject-matter of both paintings, which feature musical instruments carefully studied from ancient sources: pipes and *tibia* (double flutes), *tympana* (tambourines) – particularly abundant in the background of *The Vintage Festival*, where they must be making quite a racket – and, in *Fête intime*, a pair of burnished brass cymbals probably imitated from a pair in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples.¹³ As Ebers remarked, 'no living man knows better how [musical instruments] were used by the ancients, and in what way the latter trod the mazes of the dance'.¹⁴ In these Bacchanalian scenes, the viewer is invited to imagine the boisterous sounds of wind and percussion instruments, associated with rustic music-making, rather than the more delicate sounds of Apollo's lyre.

Alma-Tadema eventually owned a library of more than 2,500 books on archaeology, antiquities, and ancient customs and manners, including the works of the ancient poets and historians. Ebers was right, however, to emphasise that ‘the sources from whence he obtains the largest and best material are the monuments themselves’, and the artist amassed a vast reference collection of photographs, eventually numbering well over 5,300 items arranged thematically in 164 portfolios and six large albums.¹⁵ He also made many drawings, or commissioned drawings from studio assistants, to record objects seen in museums or on archaeological sites. Above all, however, the new medium of photography enabled the ancient material to come to life. It was Alma-Tadema’s visual acuity, and the visual imagination with which he was able to juxtapose and combine individual artefacts into complete settings, that made his scenes so vivid, persuading viewers that they were catching a glimpse of the living past: ‘There is no bronze or marble monument, no wall-painting, no vase-picture, no mosaic, no work of the ancient potter’s, stone-cutter’s, or goldsmith’s art, which he has not studied and placed in the treasury of his knowledge.’¹⁶

Alma-Tadema was therefore able to draw from his extensive repertoire exactly the artefacts he needed to elaborate the messages of the picture at hand, and his meticulous technique meant that each object appeared as a particular, not simply a generic example of a type of ancient accessory. Thus the three pots on the altar, in *Fête intime*, represent three different Greek vase shapes: from left to right, a *kylix* or shallow, two-handled cup for drinking wine; the *lebes gamikos* with long handles, noted above as a marriage vase; and the large bell-shaped *krater* or bowl for mixing wine, with its tall foot and small, turned-up handles [*Detail D*]. All of the vases have red-figure decoration, indicating a date after 530 BC. Since such vases were widely exported, their presence does not necessarily indicate a Greek location for the scene, which perhaps should be imagined as taking place in the part of the ancient Greek world that we now know as Southern Italy, the principal place of origin for Alma-Tadema’s artefacts, particularly in the earlier part of his career. The Doric public building or temple, the frieze of which is seen over the back wall, could also be Southern Italian, like the great Doric temples at Paestum or at Agrigento and Segesta in Sicily. Indeed the polychrome decoration of the building recalls the archaeological discoveries made in the nineteenth century at Selinunte (ancient Selinus), on the south-western coast of Sicily, where traces of ancient colouring were found and published in the 1820s by the French architect Jacques Ignace Hittorff, several of whose books were included in the artist’s library. Alma-Tadema had evidently read, and accepted, the controversial views of archaeologists who argued that the decoration on ancient buildings was coloured in vivid polychromy; here he places the triglyphs and the relief elements on the metopes of his Doric frieze against a strong red background and picks out details in yellow-gold.

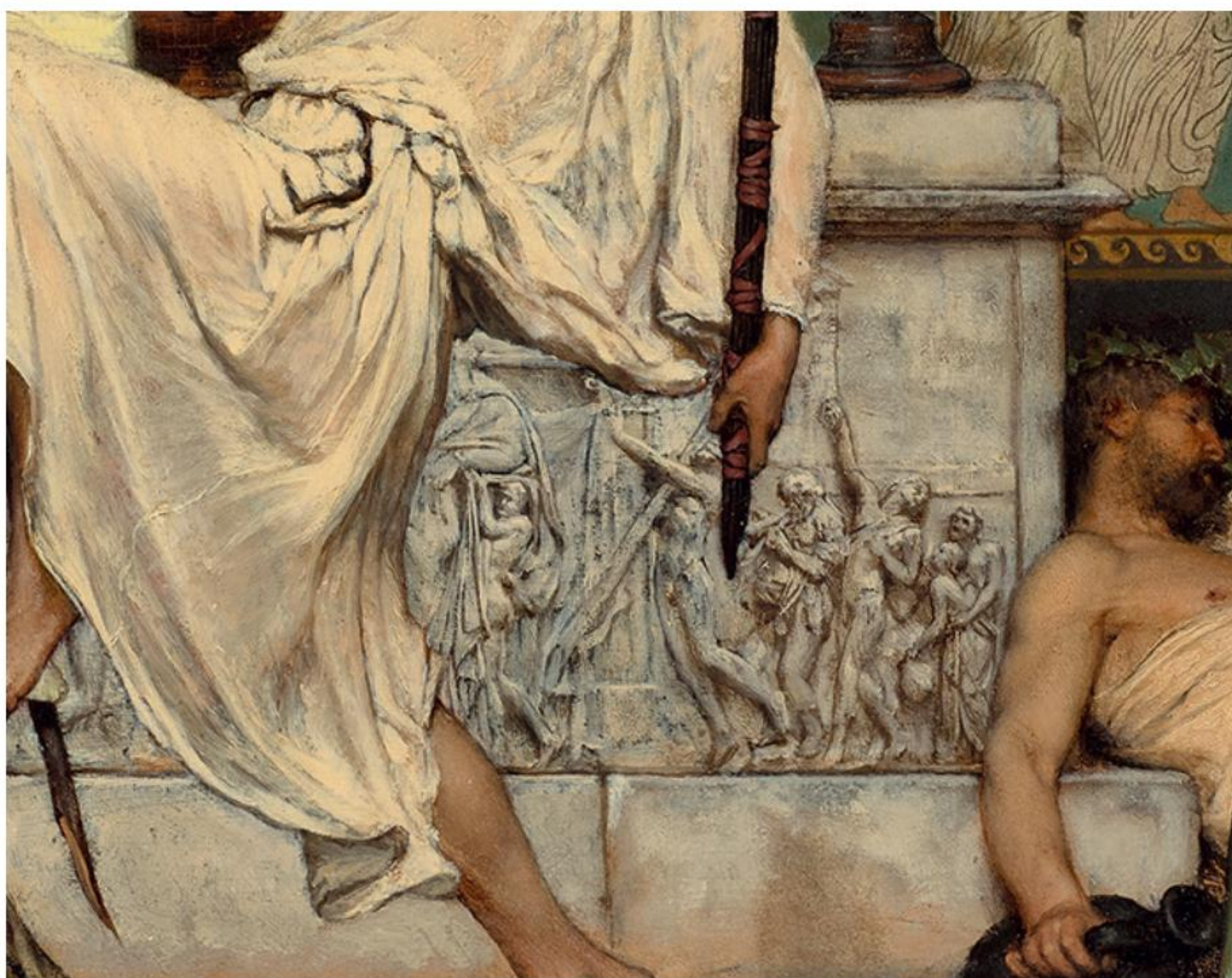
The marble altar is adorned with a sculptured relief closely based on an object that had entered the British Museum as part of the Townley collection in 1805 (fig. 8).¹⁷ The relief is thought to be a copy, probably of the first century AD, of an earlier Hellenistic composition whose meaning has been much debated by scholars. Certainly, however, it features a Bacchanalian retinue, with a conspicuous *thyrsus* held diagonally, accompanying a taller bearded figure (usually identified as the god himself). This scene, at the lower right of the British Museum relief, is clearly imitated in the painting [*Detail E*], and perhaps it is interesting that Alma-Tadema conceals the rest of the relief (the interpretation of which is more difficult) behind his two principal dancing figures. What he does show, however, is accurately imitated from the original. The relief appears at approximately its natural size, although it is given a new function in Alma-Tadema's painting by being applied to the side of the altar.

The adaptation of the British Museum relief to the altar is a characteristic example of Alma-Tadema's inventiveness in deploying artefacts, which over the course of time have become detached from their original contexts, in plausible but invented new contexts. The painting displayed on the back wall represents a more drastic transformation of an ancient artefact, in this case a painting of a Dionysiac scene on a red-figure vase of the *stamnos* shape held in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples and attributed to the Athenian Dinos Painter (fig. 9).¹⁸ Alma-Tadema's reference collection, now held at the University of Birmingham, includes a pencil drawing of the vase painting, spread flat so that both sides can be seen at once (fig. 10); this could have been drawn either directly from the original vase or from a printed reproduction of the object, which would already have transformed the vase painting into a flat image.¹⁹ However that may be, the vase painting undergoes another, and more thoroughgoing transformation to become a large-scale wall-painting in *Fête intime*. In this new context it acquires a blue-green background, very different from the colouring either of a red-figure vase or of the Pompeian interiors, with their predominantly red and black wall-decoration, in so many of Alma-Tadema's paintings of the 1860s. The effect is light and airy, with generous spacing between the processional figures in their white draperies.

Thus the vase-painting is utterly transformed to become an entirely different type of object, on a vastly increased scale, and with a dramatically new colour harmony, in Alma-Tadema's painting of 1871. And yet a comparison either with the original vase or with the drawing of it shows that the individual figures and their order in the procession are very exactly imitated in the imaginary wall-painting. Moreover, that comparison also reveals that the vase-painting is the basic source also for the main scene of Bacchanalian revelry – for the voluminous draperies, the bending or dancing poses of many of the figures, and for accessories such as the *thyrsus*, the flaming torch, and the musical instruments. The grouping of the figures around a central altar also derives from the vase painting,



Fig. 8
The Visit of Dionysos and his companions to the house of a mortal, probably 1st century AD, marble relief, 91 × 152 cm, British Museum (1805,0703.123)



E



Fig. 9
Attributed to the Dinos Painter, Red-figure Stamnos, c. 450-400 BC, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples (no. 81674)



although on the vase the altar is a table with slender legs, behind which is a traditional image of the god mounted on a pillar; the vases that rest on the depicted altar are *stamnoi*, like the vase on which they are represented.

Above all, Alma-Tadema seems to have studied the vase to help him to give a sense of movement to his figures. Earlier criticisms of his work, while acknowledging his archaeological learning and the precision of his technique, had sometimes faulted his figures for being excessively static. That was not necessarily unintended; *A Pyrrhic Dance*, for example, gains much of its power from the sense of taut stillness as the warriors make their stylised moves, and even the procession in *The Vintage Festival* is stately and measured. Perhaps it is telling that, in *Fête intime*, the figure modelled on Laura Alma-Tadema is relatively decorous. Both of the male dancers, however, are caught in motion, and the central male figure is in a pose of joyous abandon never to be repeated in the artist's work.

The Vintage Festival and *Fête intime* represent Alma-Tadema's earliest forays into the subject-matter and imagery of the ancient Bacchanalia, and they are strongly contrasted – whereas the earlier and larger picture shows a vast public spectacle, in a grand architectural interior of massive proportions, *Fête intime* presents an intimate act of worship in an enclosed outdoor space of domestic scale. Alma-Tadema would return to Bacchanalian subject-matter on numerous occasions for the rest of his career, in paintings that range from piquant depictions of single Bacchanalian worshippers (including the Bacchante in his last opused work, *Preparations in the Colosseum*, fig. 11) to monumental scenes such as *A Dedication to Bacchus* (fig. 12), made in 1889 as a companion picture to

Fig. 10 (opposite)
 Lawrence Alma-Tadema,
Drawing of a Red-figure vase
by the Dinos Painter in the
Archaeological Museum,
Naples, 1860s, pencil on paper,
 13.9 × 42.5 cm, University of
 Birmingham



Fig. 11
 Lawrence Alma-Tadema,
Preparations in the Colosseum,
 1912, Opus CCCCVIII, oil on
 canvas, 154 × 80 cm, private
 collection

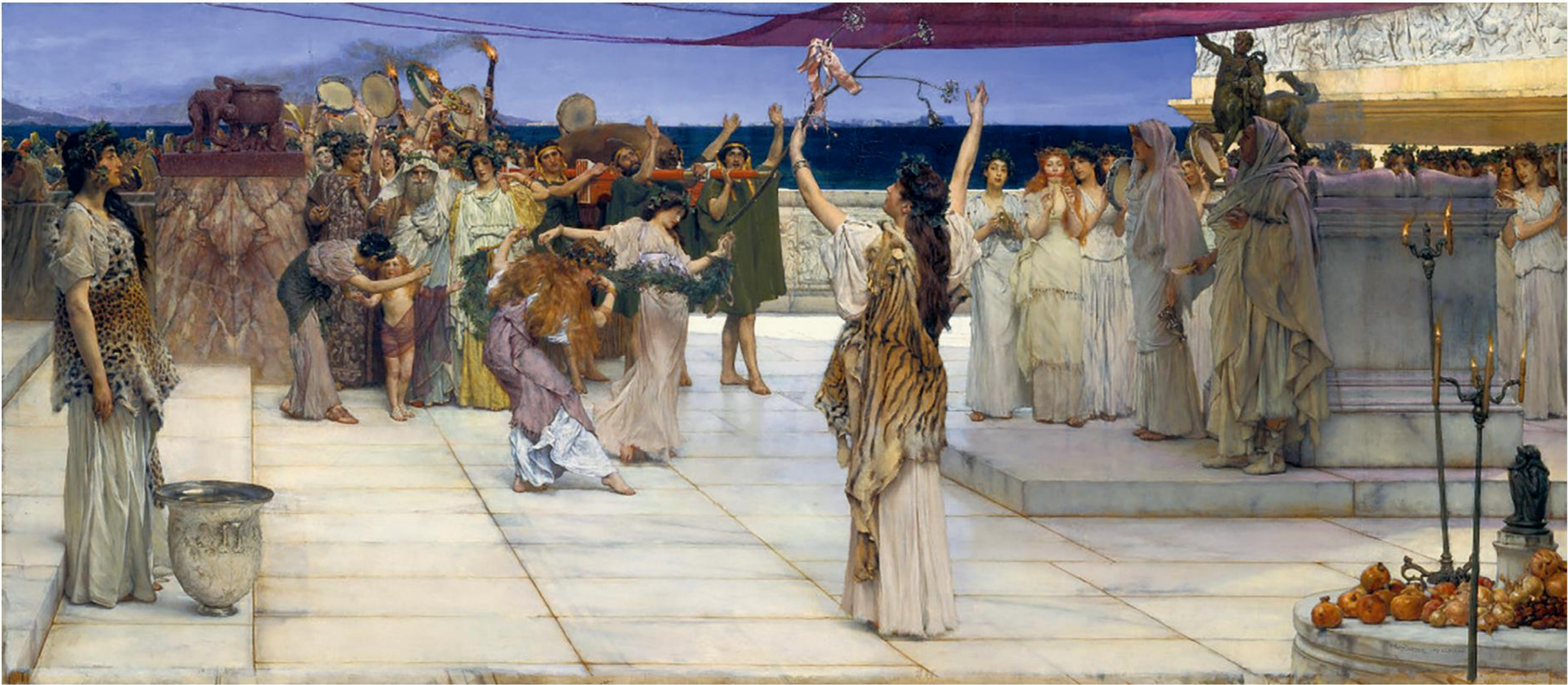
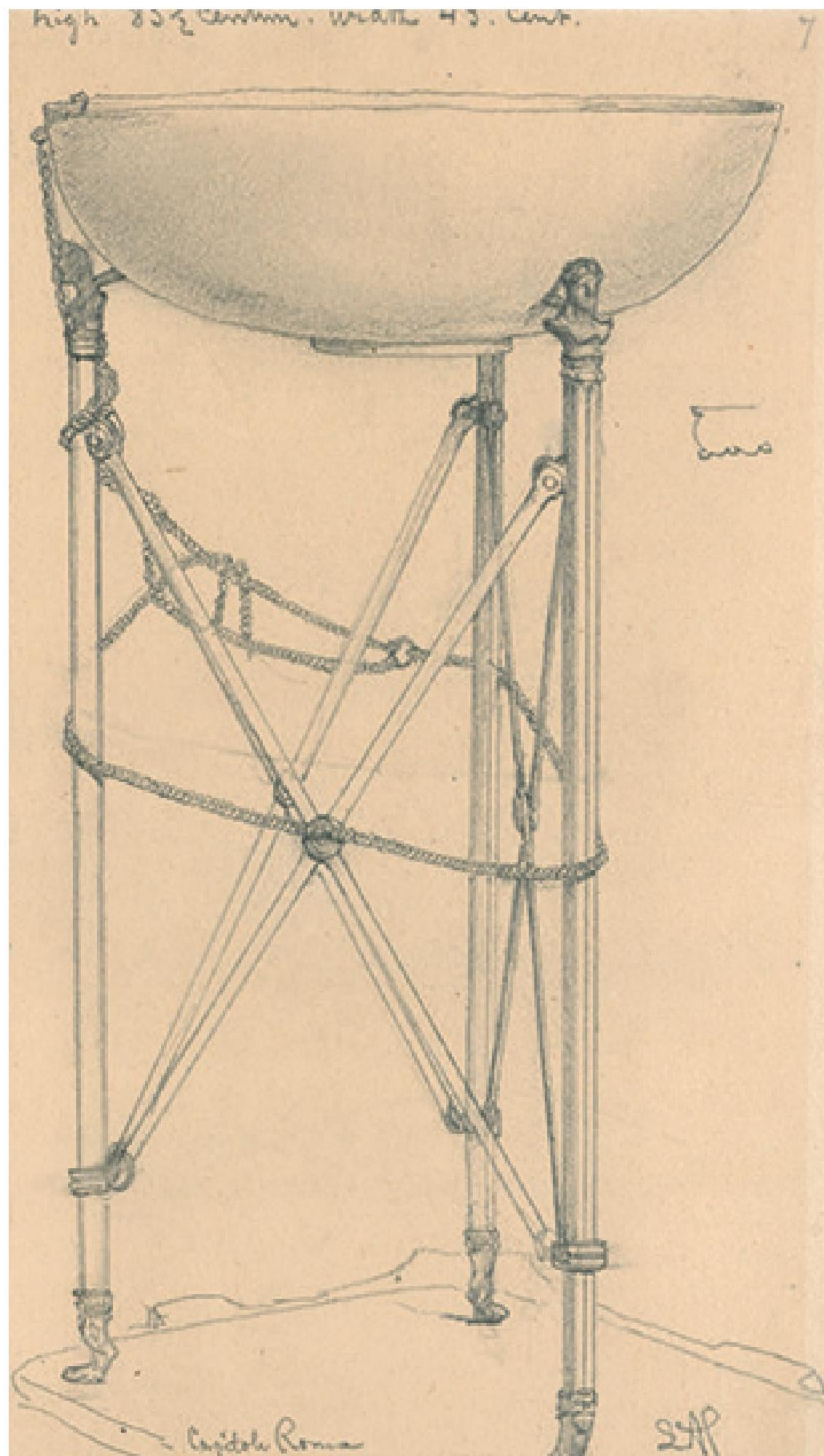


Fig. 12
Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *A Dedication to Bacchus*, 1889, Opus CCXCIII,
oil on canvas, 77.5 × 177.5 cm, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg

The Vintage Festival, for the same collector, the German banker Heinrich Schröder (later Baron Sir Henry Schröder). However, these later paintings, many of them sumptuous, all draw on the repertoire of Bacchanalian imagery and connotations initially explored in Alma-Tadema's first essays of 1870 and 1871. *Preparations in the Colosseum*, for example, includes two examples of a ritual tripod, based on an ancient object of which Alma-Tadema had made a careful drawing (fig. 13), similar (although not identical) to the tripod in *Fête intime*.

Previous scholarship on Alma-Tadema's work has assumed that his principal interest was in the public Bacchanalia, the riotous festivals that persisted throughout the Roman world despite the attempts of the authorities to suppress or control them.²⁰ The reappearance of *Fête intime* now allows us to see the wider range of Alma-Tadema's interests in the private or domestic side of Bacchanalian worship as well as its more extravagant public spectacles. That reminds us in turn that the artist's fascination with ancient religion was by no means limited to Bacchanalian subject-matter, but extended to a wide range of other cults and practices; a striking example is the springtime festival – probably the ancient Floralia dedicated to Flora, the goddess of flowers – that is represented in *Spring* of 1894 (fig. 14).²¹

Fig. 13
Lawrence Alma-Tadema,
*Drawing of a Cauldron
on a Tripod*, undated,
pencil on paper, Cadbury
Research Library,
University of Birmingham
(AT E980)



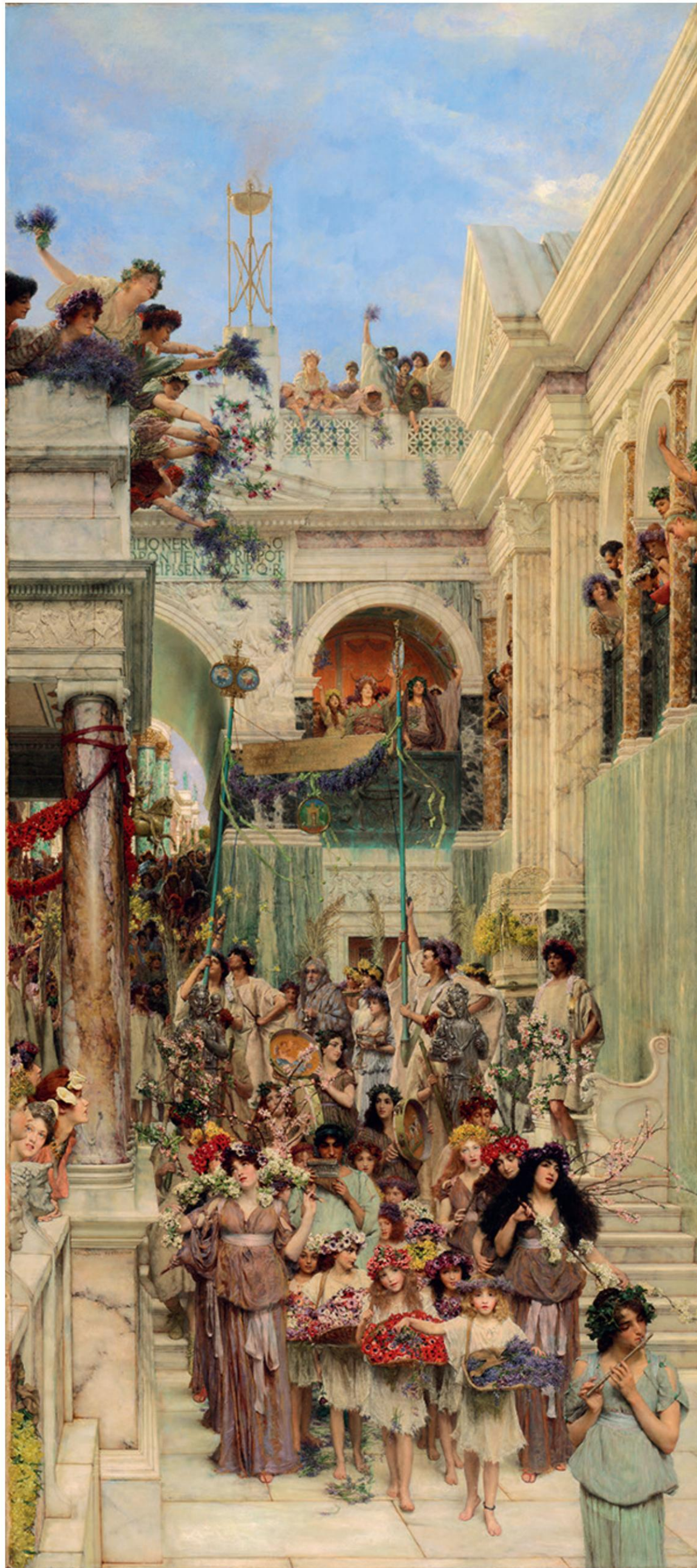


Fig. 14
Lawrence Alma-Tadema,
Spring, 1894, Opus
CCCXXVI, oil on canvas,
178.4 × 80.3 cm,
The J. Paul Getty
Museum, Malibu,
California

It is interesting that both *The Vintage Festival* and *Fête intime* break away from the predominantly Pompeian colouring of Alma-Tadema's earlier work. At the beginning of the 1870s, the artist was entering a new phase of his career. His purview was expanding beyond the material environment of Pompeii, with its small-scale provincial buildings, and also beyond the episodes of everyday social life that predominated in his earlier subject-matter. It is now obvious that an important new interest, which would grow and develop for the rest of his career, was in ancient Graeco-Roman religion, in all of its ramifications.

These new artistic perspectives were accompanied by momentous changes in his personal life. After what must have been the heart-wrenching experience of bereavement, he was leaving behind his training and first studio in Belgium to take up a new marriage and a new artistic life in London. His optimistic outlook at this date is seen, above all, in *Fête intime*.

That brings us back to the key question posed at the outset: does this picture mark a private celebration with personal significance, or is it a public work of art, learned in every detail and addressed to a wide general audience? The answer must be that it is both. The occasion of the artist's wedding – including, perhaps, the rush to finish the painting before his departure on honeymoon – and his love for his new artist-wife combine with his equally exuberant enthusiasm for classical archaeology and for researching the social lives and customs of the ancients. Each of these two projects energises the other. To quote Ebers once more:

Gay and untrammelled as his ancients themselves, he stands before the easel, and if the picture he creates, both in detail and as a whole, is as thoroughly and faultlessly antique as though he had summoned to his aid a whole arsenal of learned paraphernalia, he has done nothing except recall to mind the costume, house, utensils, garden and room of a dear friend, to whose home he has often invited himself as a guest, and where he has looked around him with open eyes. Antiquity is the home of his genius, and therefore this genius seeks its materials there.²²

Alma-Tadema may have finished *Fête intime* under pressure, as the time for his wedding ceremony approached on that morning in July 1871. But he has not lost the finesse of his Dutch *fijnschilder* technique, nor does he stint on the rigorous research needed to create a convincing environment teeming with artefacts appropriate to the subject-matter. The design of this composition was so rigorously planned that there can have been no room for error, nor is there any evidence of a bridegroom's nerves. Instead the painting is redolent of the happiness and optimism of a joyous occasion: an 'intimate celebration' that might be enjoyed in either antiquity or modernity.

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1, For the most authoritative catalogue of Alma-Tadema's oeuvre see Vern G. Swanson, *The Biography and Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema* (London: Garton & Co., in association with Scholar Press, 1990).

2, Jeremy Maas, *Gambart: Prince of the Victorian Art World* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1975), pp. 171-2, 215-16, and passim.

3, Two large exhibitions have been held in recent years: *Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum and Liverpool: Walker Art Gallery, 1996-97; catalogue ed. Edwin Becker and others, Zwolle: Waanders, 1996, cited hereafter as Becker 1996) and *Lawrence Alma-Tadema: At Home in Antiquity* (Leeuwarden: Fries Museum, Vienna: Belvedere, and London: Leighton House Museum, 2016-17; catalogue ed. Elizabeth Prettejohn and Peter Trippi, Munich: Prestel, 2016, cited hereafter as Prettejohn and Trippi 2016). *Fête intime* did not appear in either exhibition, nor in any of the smaller retrospectives of the artist's work held in the years between his death in 1912 and the 1990s (for a list of these see Prettejohn and Trippi 2016, p. 211).

4, On 24 September 1863, Alma-Tadema was married in Antwerp City Hall to Marie Pauline Gressin Dumoulin de Boisgirard, born in Brussels in 1837 to French parents of higher social class than Alma-Tadema's family. She died on 28 May 1869 leaving the artist a widower with two daughters, Laurence (born 1865, later known as Laurence) and Anna (born 1867); a son, born in 1864, died in infancy.

5, Swanson 1990, p. 39. The other work was a copy of an earlier painting with

a subject from Merovingian history, *Fredegonda and Praetextatus* (see *ibid.*, no. 136 on p. 163).

6, See Carolyn Epps Dixon, 'Laura Theresa Epps Alma-Tadema: Artist', in Prettejohn and Trippi 2016, pp. 162-3. This exhibition was the first to feature the work of Laura Alma-Tadema and other women artists in the Alma-Tadema family circle alongside that of Lawrence Alma-Tadema.

7, On the studio-houses see Prettejohn and Trippi 2016; *British Art Studies*, issue 9 (August 2018; <https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-9>).

8, Two of Laura Alma-Tadema's sisters were artists: Ellen Epps Gosse (known as Nellie), who seems to have given up painting after her marriage in 1875, and Emily Epps Williams, few of whose works are currently traced but who evidently continued to paint after being widowed. Lawrence's younger daughter, Anna, was also an artist; see Susie Beckham, 'Recovering Anna Alma-Tadema (1867-1943)', *British Art Journal* XXII, no. 3 (Winter 2021-22), pp. 32-43. Plans of the later Alma-Tadema studio house in Grove End Road show a ground floor studio for Laura and rooms that were probably used as studio spaces for Anna and Emily Williams on the upper floors. Thus there may have been work space in the house for four practising artists – three of whom were women (although the largest studio was reserved for Lawrence Alma-Tadema himself).

9, Dianne Sachko Macleod, 'The New Centurions: Alma-Tadema's International Patrons', in Becker 1996, pp. 92-3.

- 10, Georg Ebers, *Lorenz Alma Tadema: His Life and Works*, translated by Mary J. Safford (New York: William S. Gottsberger, 1886), p. 31.
- 11, Ibid., p. 32.
- 12, See Jon Whiteley, 'Alma-Tadema and the Néo-Grecs', in Becker 1996, pp. 69-76.
- 13, See *Alma-Tadema e la Nostalgia dell'Antico*, ed. Eugenia Querci and Stefano De Caro, exhibition catalogue, Naples: Museo Archeologico Nazionale / Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2007, p. 284 (cited hereafter as Querci and De Caro 2007).
- 14, Ebers 1886, pp. 31-2.
- 15, The portfolios, as well as Alma-Tadema's library, were bequeathed to the Victoria and Albert Museum at the artist's death and catalogued in 1915; four portfolios were added later, making a total of 168. In 1947 they were transferred to the Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, where they remain. Further cataloguing, including of the 584 drawings and prints in the collection, is ongoing; for further details see the Cadbury Research Library's website (<https://calmview.bham.ac.uk/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=XAT>).
- 16, Ebers 1886, pp. 32-3.
- 17, British Museum 1805,0703.123. I am grateful to Davide Gasparotto of the Getty Museum for identifying this relief sculpture.
- 18, On the *stamnos* see <https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/record/1A4F5987-8F07-4724-9420-64BBBC44BA54>.
- 19, See Nadia Murolo, 'I Materiali Archeologici nei Quadri di Alma-Tadema: Alcune Considerazioni', in Querci and De Caro 2007, pp. 56, 64-5.
- 20, See for example R.J. Barrow, *Lawrence Alma-Tadema* (London: Phaidon, 2001), pp. 48-52.
- 21, See Louise Lippincott, *Lawrence Alma-Tadema: Spring* (Malibu, California: The J. Paul Getty Museum (Getty Museum Studies on Art), 1990).
- 22, Ebers 1886, pp. 34-5.





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LAWRENCE ALMA-TADEMA

Fête intime
(An Intimate Celebration)

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